

Books

American Indian Ballerinas

By Lili Cockerille Livingston
University of Oklahoma Press,
328 pp., \$34.95

Was it something in the water, in the oil, or in their genes that nudged four young women of American Indian descent, all born in Oklahoma in the 1920s, toward star-studded ballet careers? Lili Cockerille Livingston, in this authorized biography of Maria and Marjorie Tallchief, Rosella Hightower, and Yvonne Chouteau, draws no conclusions, but she does draw parallels among the upbringings of her subjects. Raised in relative affluence, with mothers eager for cultural accomplishment, they channeled rambunctious energy (Hightower played baseball before becoming a dancer) into training they saw, from the beginning, as leading to careers and tickets out of their inland homes.

This is not a story of racism, emotional turmoil, drug abuse, or codependency. It chronicles the education and training of women empowered by their gifts and supported by their communities, who happened into the great era, nearly 60 years ago, when American ballet mated with Russian émigré culture and blossomed, at the hands of artists like Balanchine (who married Maria Tallchief) and entrepreneurs like Sol Hurok and the Marquis de Cuevas. It's a "good news" story, in which almost everybody gets what she wants: the deaths are of old age; the retirements are cushy; husbands (in three cases second or third) are devoted; cuddly dogs abound. Livingston, a dancer born in Washington, D.C., who worked and studied with several of her subjects, frames her biographies with substantial historical research, on both the Native Americans in Oklahoma and the constantly metamorphosing community of dance artists who took to the rails and the waves in the late '30s and during World War II, generating the intercontinental dance community that nurtured the young recruits. Read it and grin; give it to a smart kid. —ELIZABETH ZIMMER

The Law of Desire

Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men

By Gabriel Rotello
Dutton, 352 pp., \$24.95

BY MARK SCHOOFS

June 1977: I came down with gonorrhea, the first of many times. A few months later I discovered what it was like to get crabs. In October 1978, I contracted non-specific urethritis. In January 1979 I was treated for venereal warts.

A year later I hit the jackpot: hepatitis B plus two cases of internal parasites, giardia and shigella. That summer I had a hepatitis relapse. This time my eyes turned yellow and I was in bed a month.

This passage was written in 1983 by gay newspaper columnist Mike Hippler. AIDS chronicler Randy Shilts dubbed Hippler a "gay Everyman," and Gabriel Rotello would almost surely agree. In his book *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men*, Rotello retells the story of how 1970s gay culture allowed every sexually transmitted disease to spread with devastating efficiency. In this sexual "ecosystem," writes Rotello, HIV "was just another bug along for the ride." Indeed, Hippler, who was my lover, died of AIDS in 1991.

"People will have to accept the fact that the unlimited, unstructured pursuit of absolute sexual freedom," writes Rotello, "was biologically disastrous for gay men." Moreover, condoms aren't enough to reverse the disaster, because studies show many people don't use them consistently. The consequences for the epidemic, Rotello sensibly concludes, are severe: Because human beings are fallible when it comes to safer sex, HIV will spread faster in a population that averages lots of partners than in a population that averages few.

This idea is not new, but *Sexual Ecology's* value lies in its single-minded extrapolation of this principle. The "condom code," argues Rotello, has been misused as "a classic 'technological fix' because it has never addressed the larger factors in the gay environment that helped spread HIV." If gay men don't address those factors—"chief among them the practice of having large numbers of partners"—then AIDS will continue to ravage us, says Rotello. Even if AIDS is cured, reviving the culture of the '70s will leave us vulnerable to the other diseases that struck gay men. Rotello rightly warns, "Gay men can never go back."

By sounding this warning strongly—and by explaining the danger through the potentially useful perspective of ecology—this book makes a valuable contribution. But severe flaws

weaken *Sexual Ecology*. Rotello sweeps aside 15 years of AIDS prevention work, and his alternative suggestions are often unrealistic or downright harmful. And while the book contains many disclaimers about not wanting to cast blame or shame, they ring hollow because Rotello presents an ugly dis-

this cultural revolution. But he has no qualms about this omission, comparing his book to the Surgeon General's 1963 report linking smoking to cancer: since the Surgeon General didn't present a plan, Rotello argues, he doesn't need to, either.

The hubris of this comparison masks a serious problem: despite Rotello's bluster about speaking the hard truths, he shies away from the really difficult questions of AIDS prevention, most of which center around

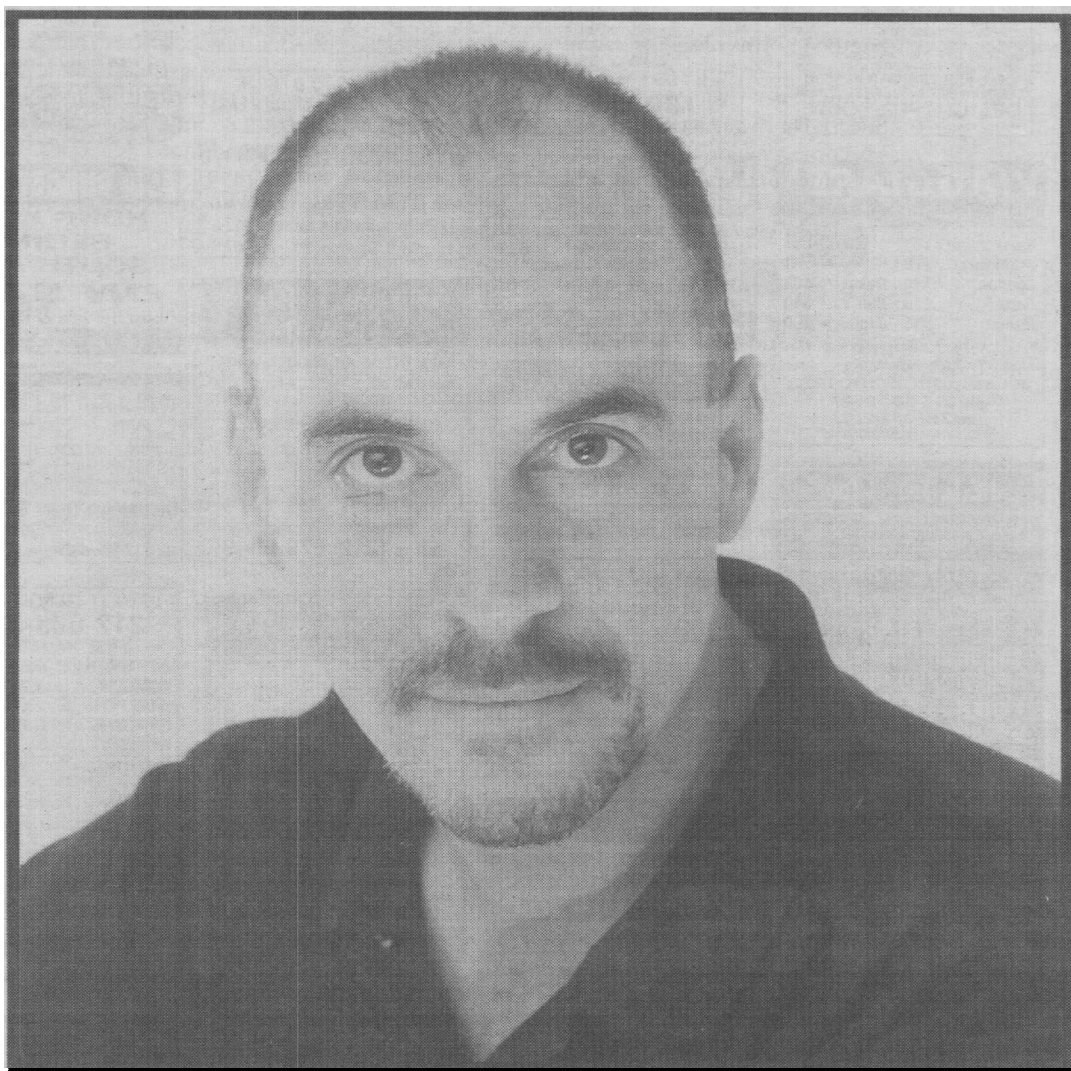
graph and a half. But its effects can be hard to escape, especially because society ghettoizes homosexuality into red-light districts of bars and cruising areas, which hardly nurture long-lasting relationships.

Besides calling for more groups to help gay youth, Rotello's main answer is to advocate gay marriage and child-rearing, which he terms "prerequisites" for a "sustainable" gay sexual culture. Maybe, but legalizing gay marriage won't halt the homophobia that deforms gay kids. By misdiagnosing why many gay men have trouble integrating sex into their lives, Rotello offers a solution that is superficial. And unrealistic. Rotello concedes that "the enactment of things like same-sex marriage and the right to raise kids is not within the power of gay men and lesbians alone." If Rotello's prerequisites depend on the government embracing gay marriage and adoption, then what are we supposed to do in the intervening years—or decades?

Just below the book's surface runs the idea that if we remade gay culture in a straight image we would conquer HIV. However, the first principle of behavior change is not to impose outside norms but to build on indigenous ones. Had Rotello done his homework, he would have found a strong gay foundation. Sadly, he obliterates 15 years of HIV prevention accomplishments, arguing that they merely encouraged gay men to roll on rubbers but not to change their sex lives in any other way. This is caricature, not history.

Back in 1984, Larry Bye helped found the STOP AIDS Project in San Francisco. It quickly became a model program, reaching thousands of gay men. "It was never, ever designed simply to promote condoms," says Bye. With a facilitator, small groups engaged in "a lot of introspection and healthy self-criticism." Frequently, "people would comment on attributes of the community that made the epidemic worse, including sex clubs and number of partners." At the end, participants made a personal commitment to help end the epidemic: "For some it was about condoms, for some it was settling down behind the white picket fence."

STOP AIDS is hardly an anomaly. For seven years, Gay Men's Health Crisis offered a workshop called "Sex, Dating, and Intimacy" that helped foster healthy relationships, and Seattle's



Gabriel Rotello: He advocates marriage and child-rearing as prerequisites for a sustainable gay sexual culture.

tortion of gay history and life. This is more than a political problem: it undermines the book's stated goal of inspiring gay men to contain HIV.

Best known for founding *Outweek*, New York's short-lived but fiery gay magazine, Rotello has the soul of a polemicist. This explains many of the book's faults, but his writing is always lucid. Gay men, he says, need a "transformative change" of our culture and mores, since HIV thrives only when it chances upon an "ecosystem"—such as Thai brothels or gay bathhouses—that facilitates large numbers of partners. Rotello would add to the condom code a monogamy code—or, at least, a code "attacking the ethic of multi-partnerism."

Rotello admits he has no plan, only "tentative suggestions," for achieving

how one motivates people to change.

According to Rotello, gay men still have too many partners largely because gay prevention leaders have deliberately downplayed the health consequences of promiscuity in order to preserve "the multipartnerist ethic of the gay sexual revolution." Certainly, many gay leaders defend people's right to define their intimate lives. But sexual behavior is shaped by social forces much larger than the politics of gay leaders—and for gay men, the most important is homophobia. Heterosexual parents tell gay kids in countless ways that their sexuality is wrong. As their straight peers are dating openly with society's support, gay kids are repressing their sexuality or acting on it in secret, with little if any hope that their furtive liaisons will grow into relationships.

In his book, Rotello dispenses with this, the core of homophobia, in a para-

"Four Before You Score" campaign encourages men to reserve intercourse until the fourth date.

Should prevention workers print posters saying, "Reduce your number of partners"? Perhaps. But, as Rotello acknowledges, such advice can lull men into thinking that merely reducing partners or entering a monogamous relationship will keep them safe. Indeed, studies show that men are far more likely to abandon condoms with a lover than with a casual partner. Moreover, those most at risk—young gay men—are often unable or unwilling to sustain monogamy.

To address this, Rotello joins a growing chorus advocating "negotiated safety." This strategy helps couples determine their HIV status and, if they are both negative, to develop a trustworthy relationship in which condoms can safely be abandoned. However, making monogamy a moral imperative would make it harder to fulfill a crucial tenet of negotiated safety—disclosing slip-ups outside the relationship.

That's one reason prevention workers encourage gay men to honestly discuss—without judgment—why they engage in risky sex. But Rotello attacks this practice because it might create a "community norm of openness and acceptance of unsafe sex." It seems Rotello would suppress discussions of high-risk sex—and this in a book that opens with the aphorism "The Truth that is suppressed by friends

is the readiest weapon of the enemy!"

When gay men do talk about their risky sex, they often make far-reaching, "ecological" connections. GMHC has discovered that many men are so ashamed of getting fucked that they get high to block it all out. The problem is that drugged sex often occurs without condoms and with multiple partners. To secure the deep cultural transformation that Rotello urges gay men to pursue "one person at a time," we will need exactly the kind of introspection GMHC seeks to inspire.

Of course, some men will remain closed to the best-crafted prevention efforts. So Rotello calls for regulation of bathhouses and sex clubs, on the grounds that, because they facilitate multipartner sex, they are engines of the epidemic. If monitoring such establishments were controlled by the gay community, and not by government officials, it could indeed strengthen norms of safer sex. But its effects would be limited, because it's becoming ever easier for people to connect. The Internet, for example, has become a major cruising ground, with some men looking for "bareback" sex, a euphemism for no condoms. Because regulators will never be able to monitor more than a fragment of gay sex, and because the epidemic's hot spots are constantly shifting, we have no choice other than to build on the slow but ultimately effective work that Larry Bye and others pioneered.

Fortunately, prevention programs are working. As the Centers for Disease Control's Scott Holmberg recently told me, "There have been huge, marked behavior changes in every index of gay male behavior: entering monogamous relationships, reducing partners, using condoms." Even Rotello acknowledges that gay transmission "is probably never very far above" the crucial threshold that defines whether the epidemic will continue.

Still, infection rates are alarmingly high among gay men of color—whom Rotello almost completely ignores—and young gay men of all races. There is also evidence that people are relaxing safer sex practices in the euphoria of new advances in treating AIDS.

By explaining the viral ecology of gay sexual culture, Rotello could help motivate gay men to contain the epidemic in new ways. But this endeavor is undermined by his molten anger and disgust at gay culture. After a balanced and even moving introduction, these emotions leak out more and more, as in this sentence near the book's end: "There is little in gay culture to support a spirit of sacrifice or self-denial, little to encourage a sense of wider responsibility, few things, aside from caring for the AIDS-afflicted, that impel gay men to take responsibility for others."

Put aside how gay men, often shunned by our families, have sacrificed and taken responsibility for each

other, effectively creating new families. Put aside the tradition of working in civil rights causes. Put aside the millions of intimate struggles to create healthy relationships in the face of stigma. Consider instead that cultures prove their mettle through adversity, then note how Rotello relegates the communal heroism of the entire AIDS epidemic to a parenthetical phrase.

Rotello's browbeating rhetoric, his revision of AIDS-prevention history, and his distortion of gay life add up to more than "mere" matters of style, or politics, or even truth. Rotello honestly hopes ecology will provide a non-moralistic framework for discussing the volatile issues he raises, thereby opening a way for gay men to change our culture without shaming people for their desires. Indeed, *Sexual Ecology* could have helped lift gay men to a new understanding of how our lives interconnect. But Rotello has polluted his own grand metaphor and made it toxic. *Ecology* reads all too much like another indictment of gay men: We have done almost nothing right. This does not stand up to the historical record, nor will it stand up to the life experiences of most gay readers. Like the majority of gay men, Mike Hippler lovingly protected his partner, which is why I never contracted a single one of his many diseases. If we want to conquer AIDS, we have to begin with the achievements and sacrifices of gay men, and build on those hard-won successes.

IF GAY
men don't address "the practice of having large numbers of partners," says Rotello, then AIDS will continue to ravage us.

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